

Two

The next morning my brain played Pong off the walls of my skull. My mind was blanketed by a toxic cloud so thick that it could only have been created by... well, not even a nuclear blast can wreak the havoc of too much whiskey.

But I did learn a new lesson. Expensive booze gives me just as walloping a headache as cheap booze. If I ever decided to follow the age-honored tradition of the alcoholic writer, that could be important. It reminded me of Trench Coat with his bottle of Ripple. Perhaps he'd earned a Ph.D. in the cheapest way to maintain a drunk.

I staggered into the living room. Piles of clothes greeted me, familiar friends. On the floor under the coffee table, the empty Crown gloated at me. Gotcha! I hadn't realized I'd finished it. I had certainly drunk enough to know that if I hadn't spoken to the gods last night, I surely must have been seeing them. Or pink elephants. Or perhaps pink elephants *were* the gods... I don't know.

I picked up the empty bottle along with the shot glasses, all of which had been used. I must have been drinking so fast I couldn't stop to fill them one at a time. Talk about a two-fisted drinker. Then I remembered the burglars. Maybe they had some. Hope they enjoyed my hospitality.

I looked across the room at the kitchen clock. Ten o'clock. Ten o'clock! Damn! I was late for work. Again. As I raced to the shower, her voice shrieked in my head, DON'T GET YOUR HAIR WET!

Ow...

On my way to work, I stopped at the drugstore for aspirin and Alka-Seltzer because I knew I wasn't getting through this day on my own. My head had a baseline that defied description. And, of course, that little jaunt for the tools of 20th century survival made me later for work. Again. Mr. Priss was there to welcome me when I arrived. Samantha Jamison, one of the junior agents, and a woman I really admired, stood next to him, glazed with a sympathetic smile. Mr. Priss had that affect on people, the glazing.

Samantha and I had become friends in my six months with the agency. I found myself attracted to her despite her plain looks, which I thought were the result of an under-use of

resources. With her long blonde hair rolled into a perpetual bun, a clear creamy complexion, full pink lips, always sans lipstick, and what appeared to be a killer body, one had to believe the reason for her perpetually baggy clothes was to keep it all an intentional secret.

Frankly, I couldn't understand why she wasn't running the place. She was obviously the brightest person at the agency, and that included Mr. Priss and Mr. Tingle. Everyone went to her for advice before making any decision. I'd even overheard Mr. Priss asking her advice on deals. Despite that, she officially remained a junior agent, which, along with her understated looks, I assumed was the result of a lack of self-confidence. It seemed like Mr. Priss still considered her a diamond in the rough even though he'd been polishing those facets for five years. To me, this diamond was ready for a platinum setting. But, I suppose a promotion meant more money and that was a sure way to bring palpitations to Mr. Priss's penurious heart.

She stepped forward and tried to create a buffer between Mr. Priss and me, but there was no stopping him as he parried around her. The octogenarian was on a rampage. He was a thin man, as if even an extra ounce was an affront to his frugality. And when I say frugal, man, I'm talking about the original Ebenezer. If this guy didn't still have the first dollar he'd ever made, he had the change from whatever it was he used it to buy. His once bright red, thick wavy hair was now a fading rust still engaged in a valiant battle, but generally surrendering to white. He wore his perpetual bow tie and elevator shoes, an effort to shore up his five-foot-two stature to whatever he could get. His face and forehead were red with a sheen of anger. Or maybe his tie was too tight... or the top had stuck that morning on his bottle of Metamucil... whatever...

"You're outta here, Owens," Mr. Priss shouted and I wondered if he'd been talking with Chumley. "I've had enough of your tardiness!"

Tardiness? Jesus, he sounded like my fifth grade teacher. Come to think of it, I was late a lot there, too. I had to think fast.

"But--" was as far as I got.

"I don't want any of your hair-brained excuses! I've heard enough of them in the last six months to fill an elephant's carcass!"

His voice stomped through my head like the elephant's carcass he no longer wanted to fill. My brain reverted to Pong, once again assaulting the walls of my skull. Perspiration broke out over my feverous forehead. My hand trembled into my pocket for the bottle of aspirin. Why hadn't I opted for something stronger? Like another bottle of Crown...

Or some Pepto-Bismol because now my gastro-intestinal tract was threatening sedition. His voice grated down the corridors of my body to my stomach where fire and brimstone churned up.

It happened as if in slow motion. There was nothing I could do but watch as a passive observer as fire and brimstone erupted in a disastrous display of last night's dinner.

Mr. Priss jumped back. I didn't know he was so agile. But he stomped on Samantha's foot. She stumbled back into the coffee cart, which flipped over. Coffee maker and glass carafe flew into the air. Glass carafe shattered on a desk and while Mr. Priss's agility had saved him from my upsurge, it set him up perfectly for the tendrils of dark coffee that splashed down his starched white shirt with egregious insult.

One would have thought that evading my vomitus assault would have been cause for celebration for any rational human being; not so with Mr. Priss. He looked down at his shirt and the streaks of brown sent him over the edge.

"Now see what you've done!" he screamed. His breath became that of a mad bull, snorting blasts of angry air. I thought he was going to D.O.A. right there out of sheer fury. He looked up at me and that's all it took, his face filling with blood, going bright red right through to his scalp and threatening to recolor his hair.

"Mr. Priss," Samantha cautioned, trying to calm the geezer, "your blood pressure!"

"Get your check and get out!" Priss screamed.

Now I can take a hint with the best of them, so off I went to Accounting for my final paycheck.

"There sssseems to be a ssssslight problem here," lisped Mr. Harding, the bookkeeper who had been with Priss and Tingle since the day it opened more than fifty years ago. Thin wisps of white hair stood up from his bald head like duck down forced out by some unknown neural event. I guess Mr. Harding didn't really have a lisp. It was more like a torrent of saliva stuffed into flapping cheeks that flooded against his tongue as he spoke. The result was a sort of wet hiss that accompanied his every word, but especially came to roost on the letter "S."

"The Ssssselectric at your sssstation isss broken," he said.

Oh my god, I thought, I had my own personal Gollum. Perhaps the Selectric would prove to be his Precious... Of course it was my fault. Not that it had broken; it just quit. Hey, sooner or later, all old things crawl off to die. I'd been meaning to report it for three weeks and kept forgetting. The thing never worked properly anyway. I thought that little typeball was supposed to eliminate sticking keys, but man when that capital "K" sank its teeth into paper, it would not let go.

Of course a computer would have been a smarter choice for a business environment, but Mr. Priss was way too cheap to get his employees a decent machine. Anyone who worked at Priss and Tingle and had a computer at their desk had brought it in from home. And mine was a ten year old laptop that liked to sleep more than it liked to wake. Way too unstable. Even for writing, really.

My white-haired Gollum ran some numbers on an adding machine that predated Adam. I suppose it could have even been an abacus of some sort. After all, a decent adding machine, or even a calculator, would have used electricity and that cost money -- god forbid. He looked up at me.

"After deducting your ssssalary, you owe usssss three hundred and sssseventeen dollarssss and thirty-ssssix centssss."

"What?" I was shocked. Surely they didn't think I broke the damned thing? And really, hadn't they flogged that dinosaur long enough? That machine was obsolete the day Steve Jobs started grammar school.

"For the Ssssselectric," he said. "It'sssss beyond repair."

"But--"

"Good day, Owens," boomed Mr. Priss's voice from behind me. He'd actually followed me to Accounting to make sure Elvis had left the building.

"You'll hear from our attorneys regarding that three hundred and seventeen dollars."

"And thirty-ssssix centssss," wheezed the antique duck head.

It must have been his voice. I'd never realized its effect on me before. But as I turned to leave, fire and brimstone once again came forth. This time, Mr. Priss was not as agile...